

Introduction by the Editor

Forgiveness is, first and foremost, a social practice. As such, it is governed by social and, in particular, by moral norms. In the *Handbook of Forgiveness*, the editor Everett L.

Worthington Jr. describes forgiveness as an ‘art’.¹ Indeed, forgiveness is a social practice that is both uncommon and difficult to perform – and the latter aspect may be used to explain the former. When a person has deliberately harmed or done wrong to another person and where the latter recognizes the intention, this person will typically feel resentment or anger. While some of those having suffered such wrongdoing will try to prevent their victimization by responding with aggression and revenge, others will feel humiliated and suffer damage to their self-respect. But where the offender and his or her victim can engage in a communicative process about forgiveness and actually achieve it, the possibly disastrous effects of aggressive revenge or victimization can be prevented or cured. No wonder that forgiveness is commonly considered a desirable practice and the disposition to forgive a virtue.

Even though, in standard cases, it is up to the victim of an act of deliberate wrongdoing whether to forgive his offender or not, the offender’s role in the process of forgiving is not that of a passive receiver. What exactly an offender has to do, which conditions he or she has to fulfil in order to deserve the victim’s forgiveness, is part of the scholarly debate. Where a victim and his offender communicate with the aim of granting and obtaining forgiveness, their respective self-conceptions are at stake as well as their conceptions of the other. Both from the point of view of the victim and from that of the offender the process of forgiveness is self-directed as well as other-directed. Furthermore, their communication is directed both to the past and to the future. Where forgiveness is granted and obtained, both the victim and the

offender overcome their respective self-conceptions as victim and offender, conceptions which the offender imposed on them by his past wrongdoing. The path is then open for both of them to set up a new social relationship and redefine its normative foundations. This relationship can of course be more or less close. At the least, they will be able to accept each other as members of the human community, bound by norms which should have authority over all people. Achieving forgiveness allows the victim and the offender each to trust that the other respects him and wants to act in accordance with certain norms.

Whereas forgiveness is an art, wrongdoing is a fairly common practice. Why should the offender and her victim care at all about forgiving? Could not the victim and the offender, rather than engaging in a difficult and emotionally painful dialogue about what happened between them, how these events have to be evaluated and how the damage done can be repaired and any kind of repetition avoided, simply walk away in opposite directions and keep out of each others' view and reach? In response one can argue first of all that the victim and his offender are not always in a position which would allow them to avoid any further interaction.² But even if such a strategy of mutual avoidance were possible, it would not be the best way to deal with the wrongdoing and its consequences. Not only would the victim and his offender, by simply avoiding each other, remain caught in their roles of a victim and an offender respectively; they would also make any dialogue between them impossible and thereby prevent themselves from ever overcoming these roles and the corresponding self-conceptions.

The practice of forgiving has long been an object of interest for theologians. In the Lord's Prayer, Christians commonly ask God to forgive their sins and promise to forgive those who have wronged them in return. And the Christian religion is not the only one recommending

believers to take a forgiving attitude.³ But since the 1970s, forgiveness has also been an object of increasingly extensive study from the side of psychologists, psychotherapists and, last but not least, philosophers. The social processes of reconciliation as they have taken place in South Africa since the end of the apartheid regime and in Rwanda after the three months of mass murder committed by mostly Hutu people against mostly Tutsi people in 1994 have further contributed to the interest in the phenomenon of forgiveness. Racism and mass murder constitute grave infringements of human rights. The cases just mentioned have captured wide international attention. Much of the recent increase in scholarly interest in forgiveness is a side effect of these terrible crimes.

One can identify both a psychological or therapeutic interest in forgiveness and a political or pragmatic interest. Scientific psychological inquiry into forgiveness and its healing effects mainly addresses the costs and benefits of forgiveness from the point of view of the victim as part of a therapeutic process.⁴ The *Handbook of Forgiveness* assembles studies of these issues, most of them by psychologists.⁵ The political processes of reconciliation mentioned above have drawn attention to the immense usefulness forgiveness can play where a whole society has to be rebuilt and where so many people have been actively involved in crimes that those surviving are in no way in a position to provide proper legal persecution and legal punishment for them. In South Africa and Rwanda, the respective legal institutions were either not in place or they did not have the capacities for dealing with such huge numbers of cases. Nation building could only succeed if procedures for dealing with the former criminals and their victims were available which were less dependent on existing and functioning legal institutions. Public gatherings took place where offenders and their victims met and communicated in order to find a joint understanding and evaluation of past events and achieve

reconciliation. The intention was to pave a way to a common future as citizens of the same nation, bound by the same laws and social norms.⁶

Whether forgiveness is part of individual therapy or of a process of reconciliation and nation building, the goal is to help people live in their social environment without fear, to help them regain trust in others so that they will be capable of acting in accordance with shared social norms. But processes of forgiveness can only help achieve this goal if they are governed by norms people involved in these processes can share. We commonly understand the norms governing forgiveness as moral. It is the moral dimension of the practice of forgiveness in particular that has attracted philosophers' interest in the phenomenon. Philosophers do not only ask what forgiveness is as a social practice, what its costs and benefits for an individual victim are and how people can rely on it to rebuild a community. They also ask which norms should govern the process of forgiveness. Does an offender have a moral right to be forgiven? Does a victim have a moral duty to forgive his or her offender?

Whereas philosophers typically focus on the moral norms which should govern forgiveness, they have to be aware of the need to provide answers to their questions which are informed by the actual social practice of forgiveness, of its therapeutic and political benefits as well as of its limitations and personal challenges.⁷

The philosophical exploration of the normative constraints of forgiveness has brought about many different views and is still far from reaching any consensus, even on the most basic claims about the norms which should govern forgiveness. Important monographs on forgiveness have, in recent years, been provided by Trudy Govier, Jeffrey Murphy, Margaret Urban Walker, Charles Griswold and Kathryn Norlock.

Trudy Govier is interested in the philosophical exploration of both the individual and group psychology of the experience of wrongdoing and victimization. As she reports in her 2002 monograph on *Forgiveness and Revenge*, her interest in forgiveness as a political tool was stimulated by a trip to South Africa in March 1997 (vii). She explores forgiveness in the context of her more general interest in the various ways people respond to wrongdoing, including in particular revenge and retribution as opposed to requests for legal justice. An important part of her argument is dedicated to rejecting the view (previously defended by Jeffrey Murphy) that a desire for revenge is a natural response to wrongdoing, independent from any cultural influence (chapter 1). According to her, discourses about forgiving and the unforgivable are shaped both by cultural traditions and actual political needs, a claim for which she provides ample evidence (see in particular chapters 6 and 7). Govier's examples and case studies bring out how important it is for victims to see their self respect and moral status restored. She argues that the satisfaction of a victim's need to reassert his self-respect and social and moral status does not depend on making the offender a victim in return. Rather, processes of forgiveness have a crucial role to play.

Whereas Trudy Govier, inspired by the very constructive role forgiveness has played in preventing or overcoming civil wars and nation building in South Africa and Rwanda, is interested in forgiveness both between individuals and between groups, Jeffrie Murphy focuses on interpersonal forgiveness exclusively. In his monograph *Getting Even* from 2003 he explores whether and to what extent generously granted forgiveness is compatible with self-respect and self-defence, especially in cases where a person has been victimized by 'grave wrongs and harms that are inflicted maliciously or at least recklessly' (12). He does not try to draw any general conclusions or principles about the proper conditions of forgiveness

and the ‘change of heart’ it implies from the side of the person granting it. Rather, he emphasises that vindictiveness has to be seen as one dimension of self-respect and is therefore not to be rejected entirely (chapter 2). Furthermore, he suggests making sincere repentance from the offender a necessary condition for the propriety of granting forgiveness (35); and his account of the proper conditions of self-forgiveness follows the same line of argument (chapter 6).

Margaret Walker places forgiveness in a larger context of ‘moral repair’, exploring not only the perspectives of the victim and the offender but also of the community of which both are members. Her analysis of forgiveness as a moral phenomenon takes as its starting point the assumption that it is ‘odd to think of there being a single correct idea of forgiveness’.⁸ She addresses moral questions about forgiveness as they occur within human relations, multifaceted and complicated as they are. Not only does she refrain from suggesting a definition of forgiveness; given the complication of isolating moral norms from other social norms that determine the relations in which people stand to each other, she does not offer us a moral roadmap. Is there a moral obligation for a victim to forgive his offender? Should forgiveness be conditional? Is there something that cannot and could not be forgiven? According to Walker, the answers to these questions always depend on the individual cases. Her exploration of the phenomenon of forgiveness draws attention to the many aspects we have to take into consideration before we attempt an answer to any of these questions.

Charles Griswold, in his monograph on *Forgiveness* published in 2007, also focuses on forgiveness as a moral phenomenon. Contrary to Walker, he does indeed offer a definition of forgiveness as a moral phenomenon. However, he avoids the difficulties of identifying this phenomenon among the multiplicity of social phenomena and their interrelations by

focussing, in the second chapter of the book, on ‘forgiveness at its best’, that is on forgiveness under circumstances which, if not ideal, are unlikely to be all fully met in the real world.

Against the background of this account of perfect forgiveness, Griswold discusses, under the label of ‘imperfect forgiveness’, cases of forgiveness which arise under circumstances where not all of these conditions are fulfilled.⁹ Griswold’s definition provides an ideal background for every further exploration of forgiveness, a phenomenon at the interface between our normative, moral commitments, our social, culturally determined reality and our private selves where morality is a constant challenge.

Kathryn Norlock, in her 2009 monograph *Forgiveness from a Feminist Perspective*, draws attention to one aspect of forgiveness which has, so far, been widely neglected in the debate, namely the role that differences in power between a victim and his offender play in our dealings with wrongdoing and forgiveness. Given her feminist approach to the subject, her focus is on power differences as they traditionally arise from gender differences and the way gender (and power) differences between a victim and her offender shape their discourse on forgiveness (including the discourse on self-forgiveness and third-party forgiveness).

The 11 papers collected in this volume respond to the present state of the debate about forgiveness in various ways, aiming either at contributing to ongoing debates or drawing attention to further needs of research. There is no pretence at bringing any of the ongoing debates to a close. Most of the papers explore various aspects of forgiveness from a philosophical point of view; those from non-philosophers draw attention to phenomena which the philosophers exploring forgiveness should not overlook and which are new in the debate.

The first two papers explore historical, social and intercultural perspectives on forgiveness and thereby provide a background against which we have to understand and further explore the moral notion of forgiveness that has dominated much of the philosophical debate so far.

Christoph Harbsmeier has studied forgiveness and forbearance in ancient China. According to his findings, which he here makes available to the public for the first time, ancient Chinese sources provide a very rich documentation of a culture of forgiveness. In Chinese, ancient as well as modern, there is not just one notion of ‘forgiveness’, there are many, and these notions reflect the many different social frameworks in which forgiveness can become an issue. For a Chinese person, to forgive is always to forgive in terms of one of the many notions of forgiveness the language provides. What is particularly interesting for the purpose of the present volume in his ‘Forgiveness and Forbearance in Ancient China’ is that the norms governing forgiveness in ancient China reflect the social norms of an intrinsically non-egalitarian society. These social norms determine, in particular, who can find himself in the position to ask for or grant forgiveness and who cannot. Accordingly, forgiveness in ancient China is not rule-governed, but role-governed: Forgiveness can only be felicitously performed by persons of significantly higher status than that of the person forgiven.

There is a debate in the philosophical and theological literature about whether or not forgiveness is or should be granted unconditionally. It has been widely assumed that ‘the Christian’ view is that forgiveness is unconditional. In her ‘Unconditional forgiveness in Christianity? Some Reflections on Ancient Christian Sources and Practices’, Ilaria Ramelli asks whether this assumption is accurate. As it turns out, there is much evidence in the New Testament and in early Christian history and literature to support the idea that Christianity does not necessarily recommend unconditional forgiveness, quite the contrary. In Patristic

authors and early Christianity, there is evidence that forgiveness was not in the least considered as unconditional. Even after becoming private, the sacrament of Reconciliation in Christianity seems to oppose the idea of unconditional forgiveness: It implies that one should admit one's responsibility, repent, ask for God's forgiveness, and promise not to sin any more and accept the penance established by the minister before one can hope to be forgiven. Even those Patristic authors who supported universal salvation did not even think of God's forgiveness as really unconditional. Many factors suggest that Christianity must not necessarily be considered the religion of unconditional forgiveness.

A second group of papers is dedicated to forgiveness and selfhood, one of the central topics in the philosophical and psychological debates on forgiveness. It concerns the interface between the normative status of the individual self on the one hand and its relatedness to other selves in its social environment.

Under the title 'What we cannot do to each other – On forgiveness and Moral Vulnerability' Christel Fricke explores the conditions under which moral forgiveness becomes an issue, namely our moral vulnerability to each other. According to our Western, egalitarian understanding of morality, all human beings have intrinsic value or moral dignity. They have this normative status in virtue of being human, they do not have to merit it. A person's dignity is invulnerable. Nevertheless, a person is morally vulnerable in virtue of her or his embodiment and social nature. An act of wrongdoing causes damage to the social relationship between the victim and his offender and thereby affects the social network of which this relationship is a part. It also affects the social selves and self-conceptions of both the victim and the offender in so far as these have been determined within this network. The communicative process of forgiveness is supposed to motivate the victim and his offender to

moderate their feelings of resentment and remorse respectively, to put an end to blame and self-blame and thereby to pave the way for a redefinition of the terms of their future interaction or co-existence. Fricke distinguishes between personal forgiveness (forgiving someone as a partner in a close relationship) and moral forgiveness (forgiving someone as a human being). The moral constraints of personal and moral forgiveness have to be understood against the background of human dignity and intrinsic moral value in general and of the various personal relationships in particular in which people are involved and which shape their individual selves.

Forgiveness is a complex and multi-layered act, and it is one that reaches into the past, is enacted in the present, and projects into the future. In his ‘Forgiveness and the Constitution of Selfhood’, Garry Hagberg investigates a number of different ways in which this complex act, as it (1) is performed, (2) is reflected upon by its agent, and (3) is maintained or preserved in future forgiveness-based actions, not only reflects the present state of the self but also *reconstitutes* the self. As the forgiving agent forgives, that agent reflects not only on what she has done, but indeed on what she now, as a person, *is*, and this self-constitutive process demonstrates a fundamental fact about the relational conception of selfhood (as developed in American pragmatism) – it shows, in the microcosm of a single act of forgiveness, how our volitional reconfigurations of our relations to others at the same time reconfigure ourselves.

Peter Goldie, in his ‘Self-forgiveness and the Narrative Sense of Self’, examines self-forgiveness and the relation between self-forgiveness and forgiving others. In particular, he considers the self-directed reactive emotions that are involved in self-forgiveness, comparing them with the resentment that is involved in forgiving others. His claim is that self-forgiveness, with the right norms in place, need not be open to criticism in virtue of its being

too easily won. Instead, he argues that it can have a psychologically very important role in developing a secure and stable narrative sense of self, which is involved in thinking about one's past, present and future life.

The remaining six papers explore various aspects of Griswold's paradigmatic definition of forgiveness and of what he has labelled as 'imperfect forgiveness'.

Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, in their 'Conditional Unconditional Forgiveness', set out to consider whether a commitment to unconditional forgiveness is compatible with the view that some forms of forgiveness are objectionably facile. Many people think that forgiveness is only legitimate when the offender has repented of his offence, and that forgiveness in the absence of repentance is morally defective. The authors argue that there is always reason to forgive an offender, whether or not she has repented; and that the supposed moral problems with this view can be resolved by a suitable understanding of what forgiveness actually involves, and what kind of negative feelings do and do not have to be overcome in it. However, they also argue that the fact that there is a reason to forgive in all circumstances does not entail that every reason for forgiveness is a legitimate one. Even if there is always sufficient reason to forgive, it doesn't follow that forgivers always grasp, or act on, the reasons which are present in the case. Hence it is possible to view some kinds of forgiveness as morally objectionable (in some cases, because they're too facile) even while maintaining commitment to the view that there's always reason to forgive offenders.

Espen Gamlund questions the common assumption according to which there is nothing to forgive unless someone has deliberately done wrong to another person. Blameworthiness or culpability is often considered a necessary condition for forgiveness in that we may only

forgive or refuse to forgive culpable wrongdoers. Typically, a person is not culpable if he has a good excuse or a justification for his action. Thus, most philosophers hold that if someone has an excuse or is able to justify his action in some way, then he is not culpable or blameworthy, and consequently, there is nothing to forgive. His 'Forgiveness Without Blame' raises the following question: Can we make sense of forgiveness in the context of excusable and justified wrongdoing? He argues for a positive answer to this question.

Jerome Neu discusses the attitude Christians are supposed to take towards their enemies. In his 'On Loving Our Enemies' he questions the assumption underlying this request: Can we choose what we feel? Can we make ourselves love someone because we think we should? What sort of 'love' is it that is within our control? And ought we be so ready to forswear resentment if it is based on moral wrongs? Self-respect, self-defence, and respect for the demands of morality may weigh against Christ's injunction. There are questions of psychological possibility and of moral desirability. There are grounds for caution. The author explores arguments on these matters from Nietzsche to Freud, Bishop Butler to Jeffrie Murphy, Kant to Rawls, and others. The most central concern is that if forgiveness is a virtue the motives matter. But then the question is whether we can determine the reasons that move us.

Arne Johan Vetlesen raises the question: 'Can forgiveness be morally wrong?' In order to provide an answer to this question, he starts with the common view according to which acts of forgiveness are premised upon acts of wrongdoing: It is considered good to be willing to forgive what is condemned as evil. The wrongdoing that came to pass between perpetrator and victim causes an asymmetry in their relationship that, short of the victim's forgiveness, will stand unrectified. Such imbalance bodes ill for the future of the relationship. Though

incapable of undoing the wrong done, forgiveness makes it possible for both parties to consign it to a past that should not spoil their future. But the question is: Can there be cases of wrongdoing so extreme that forgiveness ceases to be a morally justified, or indeed humanly possible, response? Vetlesen argues that there can be such cases and that a willingness to forgive them despite their extreme nature is widespread and may in fact exacerbate their future occurrence. Drawing on recent historical cases of such wrongdoing, he seeks to show that instead of helping us to overcome evil-doing in the world, what he deems as misplaced and unjustified forgiveness risks inspiring the cause of would-be perpetrators. In order to settle the question when forgiveness is morally appropriate, and when it is not, the willingness on the part of the perpetrator to regret the wrong caused is no less significant a factor than the nature of the wrongdoing, be it moderate or extreme. The deeper philosophical issue here concerns ownership of acts of (even) extreme evil, and, following from that, whether a perpetrator of radical evil – say, the killing of defenceless children – who expresses genuine regret, thereby gains a right to being forgiven.

Geoffrey Scarre, in his ‘Apologising for Historic Injustices’ takes the debate about forgiveness into the political arena. The spectacle of political and religious leaders apologising for historic injustices perpetrated by their (sometimes remote) predecessors has become very common in recent years, but both popular and philosophical opinion is divided on the propriety of such apologies. Using the recent Australian government apology to the aboriginal people for the ‘stolen generations’ as a case study, he argues (1) that apology is only appropriate for those harmful acts which are owned and consequently (2) that, in view of the lack of ownership by the present generation of the misdeeds of former generations, apologies for these are out of order. He proposes that apologies should be replaced by expressions of ‘insider regret’, which he explains as a form of regret intermediate between

‘external’ regret and ‘agent-regret’, and fitting for members of a collective body who lament and feel shamed by the misbehaviour of their fellow-members, past or present.

The last paper in this collection takes us beyond the philosophical debate and reflects on forgiveness in literature. In his ‘Forgiveness, History, Narrative: W. G. Sebald’s ‘Austerlitz’’, Jakob Lothe uses the philosophical exploration of forgiveness as a tool for a new critical approach to Sebald’s last novel. The main character of this novel is a man of Czech-Jewish origin who, as a child, was separated from his parents and taken from Prague to the United Kingdom to be brought up by a Welsh couple. His destiny reminds of the historical fact of the *Kindertransporte*. In the course of the novel, he tries to identify who his parents were and what had happened to them. Lothe starts from the premise that significant constituent elements of forgiveness can be identified and discussed in narratives which present, revolve round and negotiate historical events involving particularly serious crimes. One illustrative example for such events is the Holocaust. Although, in the case of this particular historical event, human beings’, and especially survivors’, readiness and ability to forgive are severely challenged and tested, this threat to, and complication and possible deferral of, forgiveness does not in itself reduce the need to forgive – although inevitably it informs and complicates the circumstances under which forgiveness may possibly occur. In the extreme case of the Holocaust, it may be helpful to think of forgiveness as a long-drawn-out process. If one does this the narrative dimension of forgiveness is highlighted, and then it becomes very interesting to study narratives which attempt to come to terms with this vexed issue not only directly (e.g., in the form of a witness account) but also more obliquely by employing techniques of fiction. The paper explores how one narrative of this kind – painstakingly and painfully – prepares the ground for and moves towards a state of possible forgiveness by presenting, via a frame narrator who performs an important mediating function, the protagonist and main

narrator Austerlitz's delayed search for his parents, both of whom are Jews and, in all probability, victims of the Holocaust.

We have evidence for forgiveness being both psychologically and politically useful. The goal of the present volume is to further explore the normative challenges involved in processes of forgiveness and to see them in a broader context of our social and moral normative practices.

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¹ Worthington 2005: 1.

² Where groups are involved in a communicative process of forgiveness, as in South Africa and Rwanda, it is unlikely anyway that the moving of all members of the respective groups out of each others' sight is an option; where could they go, given that – as Paula Green has put it - 'there are no empty spaces on this planet'? See Green 2009: 267.

³ As pointed out by David Steele, 'forgiveness is the driving force behind full confessional experiences, whether by Muslims, Jews, or Christians'. See Steele 2009: 223.

⁴ Worthington 2005: 3 – 9. See also Lamb and Murphy 2002, Kalayjian and Paloutzian 2009, Steele 2009.

⁵ Previous psychological research on forgiveness is collected in McCullough et al. 1999.

⁶ For detailed information about the work of the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in South Africa see for example Wilson 2001 and Posel and Simpson 2002. For an account of the work of this commission with a particular focus on forgiveness see Lang 2009. For information about the forgiveness and reconciliation processes in Rwanda and the way they relied on traditional reconciliation processes called 'Gacaca' see Hatzfeld 2009, Rutaysire 2009 and Clark 2010.

⁷ See for exp. Murphy and Hampton 1988: 2 and 22.

⁸ Urban Walker 2006: 152.

⁹ Griswold 2007: 38 – 112 and 113 – 133.